

Laird Learning to Lower His Voice

By MARY McGRORY
Star Staff Writer

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird is learning to keep a civilian tongue in his head when speaking with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Laird learned the hard way that the Fulbright group does not share his enthusiasm for missiles and rockets and delivery systems. His early appearances on ABM were regarded as a calamity by the White House and many foes of Safeguard regarded the belligerent Pentagon chief as their best friend.

The secretary has handed back the portfolio of secretary of state to the official holder, William P. Rogers, and at last has begun to obey the orders of his commander-in-chief to lower his voice.

Laird yesterday held his fire under the severest provocation from doves on the committee.

Stuart Symington, of whom Laird once expected better things since the Missouri Democrat is a former Pentagon official, berated him for excoriating the Soviets in one breath and then hauling out Chairman Kossygin as an expert witness on the "defensive" nature of Safeguard in the next.

A Meek Reply

Laird replied meekly that he believed in setting all the facts before the American people. "I think America is strong enough to withstand debate," he said appeasingly.

Clifford P. Case, R-N.J., the most agonized man in the Senate, invited Laird to say that the tide of withdrawal of troops from Vietnam was "irreversible," and Laird all but said it was.

Later, the committee's only hawk, Sen. Gale McGee of Wyoming, invited Laird to say that the trend was not "irreversible," and Laird agreed with him, too, and said it depended on the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.

Laird's bellicose image derives more from his stance as a cold warrior on ABM than as a hot warrior on Vietnam. He has never been as gung-ho as some of his former colleagues in Congress, and as a matter of fact he is one of the few Republicans most aware of the dire political consequences of endless war in Southeast Asia.

Suggestion Recalled

He reminded the committee that he was the first man to speak of the possibility of troop withdrawals from Vietnam. He suggested last October that 90,000 men might come home — a promise for which he was reprimanded by his predecessor, Clark Clifford, who has since of course called for complete combat troop withdrawal by 1970.

The committee, which has become accustomed by

Laird's penchant for secrecy and closed sessions, was taken off guard by his initiative on Vietnam. He opened up by volunteering the news that Chief of Staff Earle G. Wheeler was on his way to Vietnam to study the battlefield lull.

Chairman J. William Fulbright growled at Laird that certain members of the military still prophesy military victory and cited the statement of Admiral John S. McCain Jr., from Tokyo, announcing that victory was "possible."

Laird said placatingly that "the military situation was not administration policy." Sen. Albert M. Gore, D-Tenn., asked Laird if the objectives of the war had been changed. Laird replied that they were "exactly the same as under the previous administration — self-determination for the people of South Vietnam."

Objective Queried

Gore then handed him a secret document and challenged the secretary to say that the objectives had not been changed.

The document, it developed,

was a reaffirmation of U.S. resolve to install "a freely elected, non-Communist government," which Gore and Fulbright see as another manifestation of the Nixon goal of a client government in Vietnam.

"The objective is still the same," Laird said.

This is the big hang-up now. Hanoi will not agree in advance to a guaranteed "non-Communist" government and the White House is struggling to preserve some control on post-withdrawal events.

But Laird will no longer be lured, as he once was, into foreign policy fights. Nor does he want to antagonize his enemies on ABM, which he thinks he has won.

For the moment, it's "forward together" with him and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.